

Seeing a counsellor: a brief guide to primary care counselling

Most people experience psychological difficulties at various times during their lives. Often they are able to get over these difficulties with time and/or help from family and friends.

Sometimes, however, difficulties may be such that people feel unable to understand or cope with them by themselves and professional help may then be needed.

Seeking help for a psychological problem is never easy. There are many worries and fears arising from thinking about seeking help, all of which are natural. Hopefully, this leaflet will help to reduce your fears.

What is a counsellor?

A counsellor is someone who has training and experience in working with people who are experiencing psychological or emotional difficulties. The counsellor at your health centre/surgery has undertaken recognised counselling training and works according to the stringent ethical framework for good practice set out by the national body which seeks to oversee and improve standards – the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. The counsellor's work is supported by the local NHS psychology service.

What sort of problems do people see a counsellor for?

Counsellors help people understand and cope with or overcome many sorts of difficulties including

- stressful events such as bereavement, separation, illness, injury or disability
- difficulties such as 'nerves', anxiety, depression and anger
- difficulties in personal relationships such as shyness, lack of confidence or low self-esteem
- problems in the family and relationship problems

People are individuals: no two people are the same and problems develop for different reasons. A counsellor will try to help you as an individual understand your particular difficulties and help you develop ways of dealing with them.

What will happen when I first see a counsellor?

Meetings with a counsellor will probably last for 50 minutes. You will be asked to describe the difficulties you are experiencing and to talk a little about how you think the problems may have started. You will probably be asked questions about your background and home situation.

It can be difficult talking about some things and it can take some time before people can talk freely. It is important that you do not feel 'pressurised'. You will be given the opportunity to talk and think about your difficulties, but at your own speed. You decide what to talk about. You will also have the chance to ask any questions you may have.

The aim of the first meeting is for you and your counsellor to decide whether you may benefit from the kind of help that a counsellor can offer. Sometimes one meeting may be all that is needed to settle your mind, but often more help is needed.

In the first sessions, you may feel uncomfortable and unsure of what to talk about and periods of silence are not unusual. It is best to talk about your concerns in the beginning with your counsellor.

If it is decided that you would benefit from more help, then the counsellor will have to think about whether she or he is the best person to provide that help. This is not always the case for a variety of reasons. It may be that you will be better helped by one of a range of other helping agencies. Whatever is decided, your counsellor will be trying to assist you in obtaining the most suitable help.

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How might a counsellor help me?

The counsellor may, through talking with you, explore possible causes for distress and difficulties and help you understand how these have developed. Problems can be talked about and explored in ways that can help you make sense of your difficulties and thereby help you make changes, if these are necessary.

Counselling is not a 'magic cure'. You will work together with your counsellor to try to make sense of and tackle your difficulties.

How long will I have to wait for an appointment?

The time you have to wait for an appointment will depend upon the demand on the counselling service at any particular time. Your GP will probably be able to give you a rough idea of how long you will have to wait for an appointment.

How many times will I see the counsellor?

After the first meeting, if you and your counsellor decide that she or he is the best person to help you, then an agreement will be made between you. This agreement will involve deciding on the best ways of helping you and on how often and for how long you will meet. Generally, meetings are fortnightly or weekly and limited in number. The nature of this agreement will depend on your individual needs. You are of course free to end this agreement at any time you wish although, if possible, this is best done through discussion with your counsellor to avoid an abrupt or unplanned ending which may not be helpful for you.

Confidentiality

Serious and careful thought is given to confidentiality and your counsellor will abide by guidelines laid out by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Any records kept by the counsellor are kept securely.

Generally, a client's discussions with the counsellor are confidential but there are

certain exceptions to this which arise very occasionally. The main exception is if the counsellor, through discussions with the client, becomes aware of likely significant harm to the client or others. Any information such as this would not be disclosed without the client's knowledge.

If you have any concerns about confidentiality, your counsellor will be happy to discuss these with you in more detail.

Comments and complaints

If you have any comments, positive or negative, to make about the service or wish to make a complaint, please contact the practice manager at your surgery or the service co-ordinator at

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